

CUSTOMER SERVICE

A LOOK AT THE EXTERNAL CUSTOMERS OF THE FIRE SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

This research paper analyzed the factors that affect the satisfaction level of a potential customer of the fire department (the external customer). The purpose of the study was to determine those services and/or activities which are expected as part of the “job” of the fire department and also to determine the perception that the fire department’s customers have of the services that are currently being provided. Based on the findings, recommendations were then developed which should increase the satisfaction level of a fire department external customer.

Research was conducted using both the historical and the descriptive method to answer the following questions:

1. What is the minimum level of service which the customer expects from the fire department?
2. What personal characteristics does the customer expect to see in the fire department member?
3. Do financial considerations play a major part in determining the services which will be provided by the fire department?
4. What programs or concepts are available to promote external customer satisfaction that may be useful in the fire service?

The major findings of this study were that the customers of the Jersey Village Fire Department are currently very satisfied with the service they receive and that they perceive that it is excellent service provided at a relatively low cost to the citizens. Secondly, the results of a survey showed that the customers’ highest

priorities are skillful personnel and quick responses to medical and fire emergencies. The customers have other expectations but none with the same sense of urgency as skillful personnel and quick responses.

The recommendations resulting from this project are that the current programs of the Jersey Village Fire Department should be continued with an emphasis on continued monitoring of the expectations of the customers and a broadened scope of the secondary programs as resources allow.

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INTRODUCTION

The fire service in America is in a constantly changing environment. The needs and expectations of the society that we serve are changing, and therefore, in order to continue to provide for those needs or expectations, the fire service must also change. Change is often met with resistance, and in order to be effectively implemented, change must be perceived as necessary by those who are ultimately affected.

Traditionally, the local fire department provided service which had a very limited scope - the fire department extinguished fires. That scope of service has broadened dramatically during the past century. It is common today for the fire department to be the primary emergency medical provider for a community. It is also common for the fire department to provide technical rescue, fire safety education, hazardous materials incident response and remediation, CPR and first aid instruction for the citizens, code enforcement for fire protection, and elderly assistance programs. The list of services desired is determined by the customer and then must be analyzed by the provider. The provider must set priorities and must determine the availability of resources to provide the services desired. The setting of priorities must be accomplished by determining the true needs of the majority of customers while gaining input from all.

The issue that this paper will address is customer service, specifically a customer service concept that may affect the future direction of the fire service in Jersey Village. The need for customer service in the business community has been documented by customer surveys and trends in business growth experienced by

those companies who are customer oriented. These businesses have often tended to the needs of their external customers as well as the needs of their internal customers (employees) and have found the process to be beneficial, evidenced by increased profits and increased employee satisfaction. It therefore can be inferred that the satisfaction level of the customers served by the emergency services could be increased if the providing entity followed established customer service principles.

The overall purpose of this project is to identify the expectations of the citizens of Jersey Village and to recommend methods of meeting these expectations.

Two research methods have been used to develop a body of information. First, the historical method was used to identify customer service concepts that currently exist in the fire service. This research would also be used to determine if these concepts could be beneficial if implemented in the Jersey Village Fire Department. The second research method was descriptive and was accomplished through (1) a random survey of attitudes of one hundred (100) citizens of Jersey Village and (2) through an on-going customer response survey from all customers who received ambulance transportation from the Jersey Village Fire Department EMS division. The purpose of using these two methods of research was to answer these questions:

1. What is the minimum level of service which the customer expects from the fire department?

2. What personal characteristics does the customer expect to see in the fire department members?
3. Do financial considerations play a major part in determining the services which will be provided by the fire department?
4. What programs or concepts are currently available which promote satisfaction in the external customer which may be useful for the fire service in Jersey Village?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Jersey Village Fire Department is a combination department that serves a small city and surrounding extraterritorial jurisdiction in the urban Houston, Texas, area. It is comprised of approximately fifty volunteers, supplemented by paid daytime personnel, a full-time fire chief, and one part-time fire inspector. The department operates two engine companies, one rescue, one squad, one brush/grass rig, and one ALS ambulance. The city is comprised of a residential area and some light industry. The area is currently experiencing rapid commercial development as well as the construction and occupation of many high dollar luxury homes. The majority of the population is upper middle class income level. Two major freeways and one railway transect the community.

The volunteer department was established approximately forty years ago and remained totally volunteer until 1983. The growth of the community and the associated increase in call volume as well as the decrease in available volunteers necessitated the hiring of personnel to provide service during daytime hours when

few of the volunteers were available. In 1985, the department began providing ambulance service. This increase in service also added to the need for additional personnel.

In addition to increased call volume, the department experienced the widespread trend of increased regulation and mandates. More and more was being expected of the administration and of the volunteer. NFPA standards became more restrictive; EMS requirements increased and corresponding skill requirements grew; training requirements increased; potential exposure to bloodborne pathogens became an issue. In general, the expectations of the individual fire service member continued to expand.. Along with the increased demands on the volunteer department came a societal trend of increased accountability in government services. In many areas of the United States, the governmental authorities have made a decision to privatize the emergency services. This has resulted in communities which have either fire protection and/or EMS being provided by a private, for-profit entity.

In Jersey Village, neither the fire department nor the city administration has received complaints regarding the quality of the fire and EMS service which is being provided. For the past five years we have solicited customer responses regarding the service provided by our ambulance but we have not actively attempted to solicit input from the community regarding other services provided or expected.

Private business has understood the importance of providing customer service and governmental services have more recently began to realize that they too

must cater to the needs and desires of those who are served. The Jersey Village Fire Department has a sincere desire to provide for the needs of the citizens because the department is comprised of volunteers from the community. The members also are concerned with the growing trend towards privatization and wish to do all they can to ward off any trend towards privatizing the service in Jersey Village.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature that was completed for this project included many articles on external customer service and the proactive approach which must be taken to assure continued existence of our organization. The intent was to gain insight into the entire concept of customer service and then to focus on areas that would be beneficial to a the Jersey Village Fire Department.

The first book reviewed was Essentials of Fire Department Customer Service by Alan V. Brunacini (1996). In his book, Brunacini identifies eight essential items of customer service and gives suggestions, comments, and examples of making these items work in the field. It is also his observation that very little has been written about customer service in the fire service even though customer service is really the only reason any fire department exists. Thousands of books have been written on the technical aspects of the fire service but few address the personal aspects that are, in fact, the most important.

In the article, "No to Status Quo!", Fred Thorp (1997) addresses the issues of service delivery and quantitative justifications for the fire service's position in the

community. He states that the fire service must understand that tenacious government administrators are actively seeking to shift public services to commercial interests. Anytime a bureaucrat can shift expenses off the back of the taxpayer, no matter what the service, there is little hesitation. Thorp states that the fire service must be visionary and dynamic in developing a comprehensive list of services offered and that the list must remain dynamic and growing as new opportunities develop.

Robert Oliver (1993) presents a comprehensive look at customer relations in his article, "Everyday Service Excellence: Customer Relations in EMS." Oliver states that the customer determines what is quality care. Each member of a response team must consider each interaction with the public as "the moment of truth." Each moment of truth is an opportunity to influence the public's perception of the service being rendered and therefore of the general quality of the department. Oliver believes that members must have a customer service training program which:

- empowers each member with the skills necessary to achieve positive results in the face of some very difficult situations;
- provides company officers, team leaders and field supervisors with interpersonal and scene management skills necessary to deal with atypical or adverse situations, extraordinary circumstances and unpleasant conditions;
- reduces each member's stress by providing the competencies necessary to operate from a professional base rather than from an emotional base;

- reduces medical/legal liability exposures by improving the professional human relations skills.

James Ozog (1995) contends that customer service is the top priority in today's emergency service organization. Training in customer service is essential. During emergency operations, tensions of both the public and the responders are heightened. The risk of poor service increases as the tension increases. Any inappropriate words or actions will influence the customer's opinion of the organization long after the emergency is over. Ozog believes that customer service is a philosophy that must be committed to by all. A customer service plan must be developed and once developed, all staff members must be educated. The plan will be viewed more favorably if it is developed by a team comprised of staff from all levels of the organization. Customer service is not only about money or department justification, it is about people. Helping people is why the emergency services exist.

Chief Randy Bruegman (1994) states that the fire service cannot continue the attitude that we are not in competition with anyone else. He believes that it is time for the fire service to begin exceeding our customers' expectations. Bruegman compares the fire service to the philosophy adopted by the management of Walt Disney World. It is their goal to exceed the customer's expectations. The survival of the public fire service will depend upon the quality of service, the ability to minimize cost and promote cooperative labor/management relations.

In the article, "Little Things Add Up to Competitiveness," John H. Sheridan (1993) cites several corporations who have initiated programs to serve their internal customers. Wilson Sporting Goods has adopted "internal customer" month. During

that time, each employee is required to sit down and talk to his or her internal customers. The philosophy is that you cannot take care of the external customer until you have met the needs of the internal customer. Numerous other companies are cited with examples of employee involvement as being important. A feeling of ownership in the decision-making process makes the employees desire to improve performance.

The results of a survey conducted in Orange County, Florida, indicate that many factors affect the customer's attitude about the service received. Bruce McClendon, (1996) surveyed customers who dealt with government agencies. The customers wanted quick service; knowledgeable employees with a courteous and respectful attitude; fair treatment; understandable rules and regulations with consistent interpretations; trusting, caring, and empathetic service; and employees who demonstrated ingenuity and creativeness in solving problems. McClendon adds that government agencies exist to satisfy the needs of their citizens. Emergency service providers must be convinced that everyone is their potential customer and treated accordingly.

Donna Daly, (1992) also believes that customer service is paramount to the success of an emergency service agency. Her philosophy is that basic EMS training should also include training in the various aspects of customer service. Often new EMS personnel feel that their job will frequently deal with life-or-death situations. In reality most calls are very routine to the responders but are still emergencies to the caller. The responders must learn that even the routine caller

must be handled as a valued customer. Daly believes that the student EMT, who embraces this value, will continue to provide that attitude on the job.

Implementation of a customer service program takes planning and training according to Wendelyn Martz, (1995). She states that customer service is attitude combined with ability. Employees who want to give good service must be trained on how to do it and must be empowered to provide the service. Empowerment includes having the information regarding what service the customer wants and having the resources and authority to do the job.

Chief Luther L. Fincher, (1993) simplifies customer service by stating that customer service is simply matching the appropriate resources to the customer's needs. Only the personnel who have contact with the citizens will really know the needs. These personnel must be empowered to satisfy the needs. Fincher states that firefighters can only succeed if they are allowed to try. A successful chief will treat mistakes as opportunities for learning rather than occasions for punishment that will discourage others.

SUMMARY

The Literature Review was important in determining concepts of customer service that currently exist. It is evident that many authors are convinced that the public entities that are providing emergency services must give employees the training to do the job and the freedom to make decisions in the field while providing the service. A plan for customer service must be developed and the most effective

plans are developed with input from all levels of the organization. Customer service is a dynamic concept. The services provided by an organization must reflect the constantly changing needs of those whom it serves.

PROCEDURES

Information gathering for this project involved three major tasks. The first was a survey of a random sampling of the citizens of Jersey Village. A total of 100 surveys were distributed with 54 being returned. The recipients of the survey were chosen from a complete listing of the citizens of Jersey Village. A computer print-out provided the names. Those chosen were the first and last name on each page. The only deviation was if a name that should have been chosen was a current member of the Jersey Village Fire Department. (See Appendix A for a copy of the survey.) The results were tabulated by question and listed in a percentage format. The results are also listed in Appendix A.

The second major task was a review of the surveys received from ambulance customers. The process of conducting a survey of all citizens who had been transported to a medical facility by the Jersey Village Fire Department began as a quality control measure approximately five years ago. The survey continues to give feedback regarding the customers' perception of the timeliness of the response and the quality of the care received. It is also used as an opportunity to commend EMS personnel when a particularly favorable survey is returned or to provide corrective action as needed when an unfavorable survey is returned.

A literature review was completed to determine if any fire service customer service programs currently exist and to determine if existing programs can or should be tailored for use in the Jersey Village Fire Department. It was found that the concept of customer service is relatively new in the fire service but that progressive departments are realizing that their existence depends on having satisfied customers.

It must be noted that the research done for this project is the second phase of this project. The first phase dealt with determining the satisfaction of the internal customer (the member of the fire department). It is the intention of the administration of this department to implement several of the ideas that were suggested in the literature review and in the surveys of the citizens.

RESULTS

Research Question 1. What is the minimum level of service that the customer expects from the fire department?

The survey (Appendix A) of the citizens of Jersey Village indicated that the minimum level of service acceptable includes firefighting capability and EMS service provided by skillful personnel who respond quickly. This is evidenced by the fact the nearly 100% of the survey responders stated that these were the expectations they had for the fire department. While other duties or services were also expected from the Fire Department, no other area of service had nearly as high a percentage of respondents who expected the particular service.

Research Question 2. What personal characteristics does the customer expect to see in the fire department members? The personal characteristics of a fire department member that the normal customer expects are quick responses from well-trained, skillful people. The survey (Appendix A) finds these two characteristics listed in 96 percent and 98 percent of the surveys respectively.

Research Question 3. Do financial considerations play a major part in determining the services that will be provided by the fire department?

Financial considerations must always play a role in determining the services that will be provided because many of the services are very labor intensive. Services that are non-emergency such as community educational programs rely on the availability of personnel to present the programs. In a combination department, many of the non-emergency services are provided by the paid staff. An increase in the frequency of those services may require an increase in paid staff. Also, an increase in the variety of services provided may increase training costs and/or equipment costs. Information from the survey (Appendix A) indicated that the customers feel that funding for the fire department can come from a number of different sources, including charging for services. The Jersey Village Fire Department has always charged a fee for ambulance transports but until the past year the fee was nominal. The fee structure for this service has recently changed and now more adequately reflects the costs of providing the ambulance service. The surveys that are sent to those customers who have used the ambulance service

have not indicated that there is now dissatisfaction for the increased cost to the individual who uses the service.

Additionally, the overall tax rate for the City of Jersey Village has remained constant for the past several years. This action on the part of City Council has been demanded by the citizens who want responsible government at a reasonable cost.

The fire department and the other departments in the City have been asked to continue to provide a high level of service without additional tax increases.

Research Question 4. What programs or concepts are currently available that promote satisfaction in the external customer that may be useful for the fire service in Jersey Village?

The concepts that were enumerated in the Brunacini book (1996, p. iv.) are excellent food for thought. The concepts are as follows:

- “Our essential mission and number one priority is to deliver the best possible service to our customers.
- Always be nice - treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.
- Always attempt to execute a standard problem-solving outcome: quick, effective, skillful, safe, caring, managed.
- Regard everyone as a customer.
- Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.
- Don’t disqualify the customer with your qualifications.
- Basic organizational behavior must become customer-centered.
- We must continually improve our customer service performance.”

These concepts can be studied, and adopted into the Jersey Village customer service plan. Management training classes are available through local colleges and universities, as well as through the National Fire Academy. The continued use of the customer survey forms that are currently in place in Jersey Village can give needed feedback from the citizens. In addition to training the membership in the concepts of customer service, the department has realized that increased levels of service that garner customer support are easier to provide if the department has more resources. In this labor intensive service the primary resource is manpower. An aggressive program for recruiting volunteers should produce the added resources needed.

DISCUSSION

The decision to undertake this project stemmed from a personal desire to increase the level of fire department service and the perception of that service which is held by the citizens of Jersey Village. This desire is based on the concept that society today is very competitive. The companies that provide the best service and the best products continue to stay in business. The companies who provide mediocre or poor service or products are replaced. The Jersey Village Fire Department expects to build a new fire station within the next two years and also expects to ask the citizens to fund the purchase of a new aerial, a heavy rescue, and several support vehicles. In many large departments these items would not be significant in the overall budget. In a small city, they become major purchases that must be perceived as absolutely essential in the eyes of the customers. The focus

in the department from the Chief down to the newest rookie must be that the department provides such high quality service in a compassionate manner that it could not possibly be gotten from another source. There is a limited amount of published information on customer service programs that specifically address fire service issues. Some assumptions must be made regarding the need for programs in a department that has received almost no criticism from its constituents. The administration of the department must impart to the members of the department a vision of what the department could be. The negative portion of the vision is based upon things that are happening in other departments rather than in our own. The positive portion of the vision is a dream of excellence in service that is our desire for our community.

The overall findings in this study indicate that currently the customers of the Jersey Village Fire Department perceive that they are getting excellent service at a low cost in a compassionate manner. The real challenge lies in continuing to provide the level of service that will continue to generate those same perceptions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are directed toward action that will provide for continued quality service from the Jersey Village Fire Department. These recommendations were generated after reviewing the citizens' survey (Appendix A), the customer survey (Appendix B) and the literature on the subject of customer service.

It is this author's recommendation that any opportunity for customer/fire department interaction should be encouraged. In order for these "moments of truth" to benefit both parties, the fire department members must be trained in the importance of providing quality service. This training should begin with the earliest training given to a new recruit and should constantly be reinforced. Members must be empowered to make the necessary decisions in the field that will allow them to provide quality service. Administration must constantly understand that because of this empowered workforce, there will sometimes be mistakes made. Mistakes must be used as educational opportunities and must be perceived as the stepping stones in the professional growth of a member.

Extraordinary efforts in customer service that are achieved by the members must be recognized publicly so as to encourage a repetition of that level of service.

The secondary services requested by the citizens should be provided whenever possible. If resources are limited, new creative measures must be developed to acquire the necessary resources to provide the service. While most of these recommendations are general, they will give direction to the administration. A reassessment of the needs and perceptions of the citizens should be done at least annually. Each individual must be given the opportunity to feel that he/she has been heard and that his/her opinion is valuable. If these goals are achieved, the process of providing excellent customer service will continue.

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APPENDIX A

Please put a mark in the blanks which most closely states your opinion.

1. What services should the Fire Department provide for the citizens of Jersey Village?

(Mark as many as apply.)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fire fighting capability | <input type="checkbox"/> Teach CPR classes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emergency medical service | <input type="checkbox"/> Teach first aid classes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Provide hazardous materials response capability | <input type="checkbox"/> Provide rescue personnel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fire Safety education for children and adults | <input type="checkbox"/> Fire inspections of buildings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) | <input type="checkbox"/> Elderly assistance programs |
-
-

2. What personal characteristics are important for emergency service personnel?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> well-trained, skillful | <input type="checkbox"/> quick responses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> well groomed | <input type="checkbox"/> polite |
| <input type="checkbox"/> kind | <input type="checkbox"/> patient |
| <input type="checkbox"/> capable of doing heavy work | <input type="checkbox"/> healthy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other (please specify) | |
-

3. How should the Fire Department be funded?

- ☐ funded through the City budget (tax dollars, etc.)
- ☐ charges for services
- ☐ fundraisers
- ☐ donations
- ☐ subscription service (the citizens pay a premium much like insurance)
- ☐ other
-

4. Do you feel that the Fire Department provides good service at relatively low cost to the citizens?

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ I have no opinion

5. Have you had to call the Fire Department for assistance or to handle an emergency?

☐ yes ☐ no

6. If you answered yes to question # 5, please answer this question regarding the service you received. Mark all items with a Y - yes, N - no, or N/A - does not apply.

- ☐ The Department quickly responded to my call.
- ☐ The crew was skillful and knew how to handle the emergency.
- ☐ The crew was polite and kind to those involved in the emergency.
- ☐ The crew had a professional appearance.
- ☐ The crew had the proper equipment needed to handle the emergency.
- ☐ The crew answered my questions/solved my problem.
- ☐ My problem was not solved but I was given some options that made sense.
- ☐ I was dissatisfied with the service and should have complained to the City.

Thank you for your time.

Listed below are the results of the random survey of the citizens of Jersey Village. The numbers represent the percentage of responders who chose to mark a particular category.

1. What services should the Fire Department provide for the citizens of Jersey Village?

100 %	Fire fighting capability
97%	Emergency medical services
43%	Hazardous materials response
73%	Fire Safety education for children and adults
46%	Teach CPR classes
40%	Teach first aid classes
50%	Provide rescue personnel
46%	Fire inspection of buildings
57%	Elderly assistance programs

2. What characteristics are important for emergency service personnel?

97%	Well-trained, skillful
37%	Well groomed
43%	Kind
40%	Capable of doing heavy work
97%	Quick responses
46%	Polite
40%	Patient
53%	Healthy

3. How should the Fire Department be funded?

93%	Funded through the City budget (tax dollars, etc.)
33%	Charges for service
23%	Fundraisers
30%	Donations
0%	Subscription service

Note: Half of the responders who indicated that fundraisers should be part of the funding process also said that they would be willing to participate in the fundraiser.

4. Do you feel that the Fire Department provides good service at relatively low cost to the citizens?

87%	Yes
0%	No
13%	No opinion

5. Have you had to call the Fire Department for assistance or to handle an emergency?

43%	Yes
57%	No

6. If you answered yes to question #5, please answer this question regarding the service you received. (Mark all items with a Y-Yes, N-No, or N/A- does not apply)

100%	The Department quickly responded to my call.
100%	The crew was skillful and knew how to handle the emergency
100%	The crew was polite and kind to those involved in the emergency.
100%	The crew had a professional appearance.
100%	The crew had the proper equipment needed to handle the emergency.
100%	The crew answered my questions/solved my problem.
10%	My problem was not solved but I was given some options that made sense.
0%	I was dissatisfied with the service and should have complained to the City.

Note: One responder stated they were dissatisfied because someone from the Fire Department discussed the call at their house with the neighbors and thought it was unprofessional. (This author agrees that it was unprofessional.)

****** Many additional side comments were written on the surveys regarding the good service provided and the desire to see the Fire Department continue the good work.

APPENDIX B

Jersey Village

Emergency Medical Services

Date of Incident: _____

Location: _____

1. Did the ambulance crew respond to your emergency reasonable time? YES NO
2. Did the dispatcher assure you that ehlp was on the way? YES NO
3. Was the ambulance crew courteous and professional? YES NO
4. Do you feel that the medical treatment provided was adequate? YES NO
5. Do you have any comments or questions concerning the handling of your emergency? List comments or questions on the reverse side. YES NO
6. If you have recommendations which may help us improve our service, please list them on the reverse side.

INFORMATION ABOUT YOURSELF: (OPTIONAL)

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

Thank you for taking the time to help us improve our service.